NO DAY LIKE THIS ONE
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Psalm 118:19-29
Mark 11:1-11

"Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches. . . .
Those who went ahead were shouting,
'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'"
Mark 11:8-9 (NRSV)

Dear God, your Son came to the city this day and people received him joyfully. So may we receive him. As he came humbly, so come to us with grace and mercy and forgiveness. As he came in strength, challenge us with a new vision of our city, our nation, our world. As he startled his friends and the onlookers, so startle us again, O God, with your urgent love for us and for the world. Amen.

William Stringfellow, a distinguished lawyer who became a very distinguished theologian and who died much too soon, was a strong critic of the church. He was particularly feisty about Palm Sunday. He used to say that Christians go to church on Palm Sunday because they love a parade. I used to resent Stringfellow's saying that. But I now conclude that he was partially right. I love Palm Sunday.

There is no day quite like this one, is there? If there is a better moment in the life of this church than the children's processional on Palm Sunday, I can't think what it might be. They come down the aisle in numbers that astonish us. They fill the chancel and the sanctuary. They disturb the normal sedate dignity of worship. Presbyterians like their religion "decently and in order." And there is nothing very orderly about several hundred children waving palm branches. (Although, truth be told, it is no small accomplishment of logistics to get them all here and lined up and in and out in a manner that lets us get on with the business of the day.) I confess, however, particularly when I have the unique blessing of meeting my own grandchildren in the parade, that I sometimes feel that maybe they are the business of the day, they and the spontaneous joy of him coming into the city.

In any event, there is no day quite like it in the life of this congregation. And there is no day quite like it in the church year. Someone noted recently that Palm Sunday has all the elements of a classic drama: great characters—frightened disciples stumbling along behind him, cheering crowds, conspiring

politicians—and behind it all the clash of huge civilizations and religions and worldviews. And in the center—in fact towering over it all—the figure of one man, a young man, riding on a donkey, on his way to his own death.

There is no occasion quite like it in terms of contrasting emotions. We love the festivity of it all. We love the idea, or at least I always have, that Jesus himself enjoyed this day, felt affirmed by the adulation of the crowds, had at least this one moment of victory as the crowds shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." And yet we know how the story will end, how five days later the cheering crowds will have disappeared or have changed into a jeering mob, how the hosannas of the first day of the week will become "Crucify him" on Friday afternoon, how the palm branches strewn in his path will be replaced by a crown of thorns mockingly pressed into his brow, and how he will not sit on the throne of David (which is what that cheering crowd really wanted and expected) but instead will die, apparently weak, vulnerable, helpless.

I found it impossible this week as I thought about Palm Sunday not to think about another city, Baghdad; impossible, as I thought about Jesus' entourage moving from Bethany to Jerusalem, not to think about young Americans moving toward the capital of Iraq, entering the city and being greeted by cheering crowds; found it impossible not to feel relief and pride and hope for the future, for a new situation—although if this Sunday has anything to teach us, it might be to be wary of cheering crowds and, now in light of what is, in fact, transpiring, the lawlessness and the looting, to be aware of the commitment and compassion and justice, what the new reality we have created now demands of us as a nation. "We have won the war; now let's win the peace," *Sojourners* magazine editorialized on Friday, identifying a task far more demanding and difficult than defeating the Iraqi army. To win the peace we are going to have to attend to some business we have been ignoring: like the peace and security of Israel and peace and justice for the Palestinian people and a secure state of their own. Thomas Friedman said in an editorial this morning that the Arab world has seen American strength. Now it is time to show America's goodness. And he quoted Colin Powell, who, in responding to a reporter's suggestion that America really is trying to build an empire, answered that the only territory we have ever asked for from nations we have invaded—or in whose country we have fought—is a small parcel of land to bury our dead.

It's time now to show some goodness and equity and compassion and justice.

I found it impossible not to be humbly grateful for those young Americans risking their lives, suffering and dying for a cause much bigger than their own lives, and aware of how somehow that selflessness is the best and holiest of the humanity of every one of us, quite apart from whether we understand and agree with this war in the first place.

For Jesus of Nazareth it begins when, weeks before, he makes a decision to leave the relative safety and simplicity of Galilee, with its small villages, its lake and fishing and shepherding, to go south to Jerusalem, a big city, to observe the Passover. Jewish pilgrims crowded into the city at Passover time. It was the dream of every devout person to make the pilgrimage, to offer a sacrifice in the temple. It all made the Romans nervous. They understood that the Jewish Passover celebrated the liberation of the people from slavery centuries earlier and so it was a patriotic occasion, when nationalist sentiments ran high. The Romans were so wary that they increased the normal number of troops in the city, and the Roman governor himself, a man by the name of Pontius Pilate, moved inland from his headquarters in Caesarea to Jerusalem during Passover.

So Jesus was going to the city at a very volatile time, and his friends were frightened. And then, on the outskirts of the city, at a town called Bethany, where friends of his lived, he did something peculiar. He asked for a donkey to ride, something he didn't ordinarily do, and they thought immediately of the ancient prophecy that the messiah would come to the city in that way, "victorious but humble, riding on an ass, or colt, the foal of an ass," which is what he took the trouble to do. And so when people saw it, they reacted. It was the moment they, and all the generations before them, had been waiting for, the coming of the messiah, God's anointed who would restore the monarch, who would sit on the throne of David and reign over Israel once again, an independent and proud nation. He would rally his people, organize the revolutionary and paramilitary forces already operating in the city, and drive out the hated Romans.

That's the kind of moment it was. And so can you imagine the letdown at what comes next? He ought to have gone to the public square or the temple gates and delivered a powerful speech, rallying the people around the cause of freedom. Instead, the way Mark tells it, with elegant simplicity, he "entered Jerusalmen and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." No speech, no public demonstration, no revolution; something like a tourist, he came to the city, had a look, and left. And I expect that at least some of the crowd that so exuberantly welcomed him a few hours earlier were already having second thoughts, were already changing their minds.

It's the next day, Monday, when the real trouble begins. He came back again on Monday, and this time there was no parade. This time he went to the temple and upset the tables of the money changers and argued with the religious authorities in a way that undermined their authority and credibility and criticized the scholars and lawyers and predicted that the temple itself would be destroyed. He quickly wore out his welcome, and almost immediately the religious and political authorities got together and decided to do what they had to do: figure out a way to have him arrested, tried, and executed.

There is no day quite like this one in terms of raw human drama. But it is more than human drama. There is deep truth here in the story, important truth,

ultimate truth, life-changing, life-saving truth, truth about the nature of God and about our humanity and about what it means to live a life of faith, to follow somehow this one who comes to the city on the first day of the week.

He did not have to do it, of course. He could have stayed in Galilee and avoided the risks of the city, lived comfortably and safely, working as a carpenter, teaching in the synagogue as a thoughtful and helpful rabbi. The decision to go to Jerusalem itself is significant for what it tells us about the life of faith. By deciding to leave the safety of Galilee and assume the risks of the city, Jesus shows something very important about the geography of faith. Living faithfully means living thoroughly in the world. He didn't come to a quiet retreat center or monastery; he did not elect to stay in the relative comfort and security of Galilee. Instead he seems intentionally to be leading his disciples and us into a more intentional life of radical involvement in the world.

Somewhere in the heart and soul of each of us, I think, is a lingering suspicion that the life of faith is not worldly, is lived at arms length from the world. The childhood faith of many of us taught us that the world is suspect. I remember learning a little song in Sunday School:

> Be careful little eyes what you see,
> Be careful little eyes what you see,
> For the Father up above is looking down in love,
> So be careful little eyes what you see.

It went on:

> Be careful little ears what you hear,
> Be careful little mouth what you say,
> Be careful little hands what you touch.

As if to say that humanity itself is so irredeemably fallen—all of it, its needs and desires and appetites—so completely fallen that the religious life will be a constant, vigilant battle against our humanity. And spelled out on a broader canvas, religion itself ought to have as little to do as it can with the things of this world, ought to live, so far as it can, in an alternate universe, safe, cloistered, separated from the messiness of politics and economics and the complexities of life in this complex world. That, I submit, is a difficult position to sustain in light of what Jesus did this day.

It was the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who once said that "when we talk about love we have to become mature or we will become sentimental. Basically love means . . . being responsible, responsibility to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind" (*Justice and Mercy,* p. 35)

When he came to Jerusalem, Jesus demonstrated that his way, the way that is truth and light and life itself, is lived thoroughly and unapologetically in the world.

And there is a word here today for a church in the city. This particular church has lived faithfully in this city for 132 years. And consistently over those years it has always defined its own life on the basis of its urban neighborhood and urban neighbors. If you want to know what that means today, you should spend an hour around our reception desk during the week and witness the people who come into this church building from morning to night, fifteen hours a day every day. In the early morning, members of AA struggling with addiction, parents and children arriving for Day School and day care, older adults for aerobics and classes, Bible study at noon, and all day the needy and homeless coming to the Social Service Center for food and clothing—all welcomed in the name of the very one who must have loved the city too. The city is noisy, messy, full of energy. When I visit a suburban church, I am envious of how neat and tidy everything is. Sometimes bizarre things happen in a city church, like the times when the huge red lobster that used to stand on the corner handing out advertisements for a seafood restaurant came in the building to use the restroom (always something of a surprise to the unexpecting visitor, also visiting the restroom, only to encounter a six-foot-tall lobster). Mail carriers, traffic officers, Street Wise salespeople, street musicians all come, and then later on the same day, hundreds of youngsters from Cabrini-Green, here for a hot meal and a tutoring session—in the name of the one who came to the city.

I sat in the very back row of the sanctuary, in one of the wooden chairs, last Sunday afternoon listening to the Tower Brass play an absolutely exquisite Buxtehude fanfare and chorale. It was cold and windy outside, and in came a man, apparently homeless, dressed in army surplus fatigues, carrying all his worldly belongings in several shopping bags, and he sat down in the last pew. He listened for a moment and then retrieved a container of soup from one of the shopping bags and proceeded to eat and listen. When his soup was gone, he stretched his legs, yawned, arranged his coat as a pillow, leaned on the side of the pew, and fell asleep, safe and warm for the moment at least, with heavenly music surrounding him. And I thought, that's why we are here. He's the reason—he and the one who came to the city and bids us be his body here, his very presence.

And Jesus' coming to the city reveals something of the mystery of God's relationship with us and God's summons to live out that relationship with courage and commitment and the blessed assurance that God's love for us will follow us and will never let us go.

To love anything, to care deeply about anything, is to be vulnerable, whether it's another human being, your country, a city, even a baseball team. C. S. Lewis remained single well into middle age, finally fell in love, married, and then his wife, Joy, the love and light of his life, died. There is a wonderful play

about it, *Shadowlands,* and Lewis himself wrote about it in a book *A Grief Observed.* He also wrote unforgettably:

> To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But, in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." (*The Four Loves,* p. 111)

We do love the spontaneous joy of Palm Sunday—the victory. We look on with wonder today as a young man becomes vulnerable, a young man who loves his friends and his nation and his religion and the city, loves the gift of his own life so much that he decides to live it out thoroughly, passionately, and courageously. And with faith deepened over the years of thinking about this story and pondering its meaning, we see in the drama of this day something of the nature of God. God loves like that. God loves us like that. God comes into life where it is lived, into your life and mine, wherever we are, whoever we are —young, middle-aged, old, healthy or sick, happy or sad, confident or scared to death, serene or anxious—God comes and bids us live our lives, following Jesus, with intentionality and the vulnerability of great love, with passion and courage and gratitude.

We know how the drama concludes in five days. And we look on in wonder as, in love, he comes to the city and goes to his cross.

> Here might I stay and sing
> No story so divine:
> Never was love, dear King,
> Never was grief like thine.
> This is my friend,
> In whose sweet praise
> I all my days could gladly spend.

Amen.